So What Exactly is an *Elohim*?

chapter excerpted from Mike's first draft of his next book

To this point in our discussion, we've talked about the Bible's divine council of gods and angels, the unique God of Israel who directs that council, and the "second God" (the "Son" deity figure) who is co-ruler of the council. If you're tracking with me, you know that I believe in the Trinity just like most of you who are reading this book. Way back in the introduction I telegraphed that for you. And in the last chapter, which no doubt came out of left field for practically every reader, I related how certain members of the divine council are explicitly called *gods* in the inspired text, but that these gods were inferior to Yahweh, the God of Israel, and His unique co-ruler, the Son.

I know how difficult it was for me to understand that some cherished notions about the word G-O-D were actually misconceptions. One was an idea dealt with in the last chapter, that the false gods of the Bible were only idols. Another notion that didn't conform to the reality of the text was that the word G-O-D is only a name, not just an "ordinary" noun. Because I thought G-O-D was exclusively the name of a personal being, and a unique being at that, I tended to assign the attributes of that being, Yahweh of Israel, to the three letters G-O-D. When I came to realize that there were other G-O-D-S in a heavenly council, it *seemed* (and that's an important word) as though Yahweh was just one among equals. That bothered me.

In the last chapter I explained why this concern was imaginary. Yahweh is inherently distinct and superior to all other gods. Yahweh is an *elohim* (a god), but no other *elohim* (gods) are Yahweh. I'm not assuming that the last chapter answered all your questions about the divine council, though. I'm betting that many of you are like I was after first discovering what the inspired text really says—what the ancient worldview of Israel really assumed. You still may be stuck on the idea that there can only be one *elohim* since Yahweh is called *elohim* in so many places in the Bible. And if that's not true, you might be asking, then what *is* an *elohim*? Even further, you might doubt that Yahweh can be part of the class of *elohim* and still be "species unique" as I described in the last chapter. That's what we're going to address here.

The second doubt is easily handled. On one level, it is no problem for Yahweh to share attributes with inferior creatures he has created. After all, he does that with respect to us. We mirror the creator in what theologians have often called "communicable" attributes. Examples would be love, mercy, intelligence, and so forth. Those attributes Yahweh alone possesses are often termed "incommunicable" attributes. Examples would be omnipotence, self-existence, and omniscience. By definition only one being can be all powerful (omnipotent). If that being's power is matched by another, then he wouldn't truly be supreme in power. As the High God shares attributes with us as his creatures, so lesser *elohim* may share some of his qualities.

The former concern is probably the one that most readers find more tricky: How can Yahweh can be part of the class of *elohim* and still be "species unique"? Answering this question is actually not difficult, but it requires two adjustments in your thinking: (1) that *elohim* as a term does *not* speak of a range of attributes with which we would

only associate Yahweh; and (2) that the term refers only to a being's *proper plane of existence*. The second consideration is crucial, in that it is the key to sorting out how various beings can be described as *elohim* and yet only one Yahweh exists.

I don't have to tell you that sorting out this issue is important so as to coherently distinguish Yahweh from the other *elohim*. But I've been holding back another reason why it's important. It may surprise you, but there are other beings in the Old Testament that are called *elohim* besides Yahweh and the gods of the divine council. Demons and the spirits of the human dead are also called *elohim* in the Hebrew text! Angels may also be called elohim, depending on how one takes a text or two. If we don't come to grips with just what an *elohim* is, it can create a lot of confusion. We can't very well have God, the gods, demons, angels, and the spirits of dead people all interchangeable with respect to their attributes! That just makes no sense—and highlights why understanding the term *elohim* as denoting a certain plane of existence is so critical to getting the Bible's worldview and its theology right.

With Chapter 3 fresh in your mind, you're familiar with the other plural *elohim* of Yahweh's council. No need to repeat that. So let's move on to the other entities who are referred to as elohim. In Deuteronomy 32, Moses is rehearsing how Israel sinned during their wilderness trek by worshipping other gods. When we get to verse 17 we read this statement (note the underlining): "They sacrificed to demons, not God,[i] to gods (*elohim*) they had never known, new gods (lit., new ones) that had come along recently, whom your fathers had not feared." The important observation is that the Israelites sacrificed to demons, and those recipients of the sacrifices are also called gods (*elohim*).

In 1 Samuel 28:13 we see that spirits of the human dead are also called *elohim*. That text occurs amid the story of Saul and the witch at Endor. The wider context (1 Samuel 28:3-18) reads:

> **3** Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried
> him in Ramah, his own city. And Saul had put the mediums and the
> necromancers out of the land. **4** The Philistines assembled and came and
> encamped at Shunem. And Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at
> Gilboa. **5** When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and
> his heart trembled greatly. **6** And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the
> LORD did not answer him, either by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets.
> **7** Then Saul said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a
> medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her." And his servants said
> to him, "Behold, there is a medium at En-dor." **8** So Saul disguised
> himself and put on other garments and went, he and two men with him.
> And they came to the woman by night. And he said, "Divine for me by a
> spirit and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you." **9** The woman
> said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off
> the mediums and the necromancers from the land. Why then are you
> laying a trap for my life to bring about my death?" **10** But Saul swore to
> her by the LORD, "As the LORD lives, no punishment shall come upon
> you for this thing." **11** Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for
> you?" He said, "Bring up Samuel for me." **12** When the woman saw
> Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice. And the woman said to Saul,

> “Why have you deceived me? You are Saul.” 13 The king said to her,
> “Do not be afraid. What do you see?” And the woman said to Saul, “I see
> a god (*elohim*) coming up out of the earth.” 14 He said to her, “What is
> his appearance?” And she said, “An old man is coming up, and he is
> wrapped in a robe.” And Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed
> with his face to the ground and paid homage. 15 Then Samuel said to
> Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” Saul answered,
> “I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and
> God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by
> prophets or by dreams. Therefore I have summoned you to tell me what I
> shall do.” 16 And Samuel said, “Why then do you ask me, since the LORD
> has turned from you and become your enemy? 17 The LORD has done to
> you as he spoke by me, for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your
> hand and given it to your neighbor, David. 18 Because you did not obey
> the voice of the LORD and did not carry out his fierce wrath against
> Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. 19
> Moreover, the LORD will give Israel also with you into the hand of the
> Philistines, and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me. The LORD
> will give the army of Israel also into the hand of the Philistines.”

Traditional commentators have often tried to argue that the text doesn’t mean what it clearly says. They want to have the woman lying to Saul. However, many scholars recognize that this hardly explains the woman’s fear—when she sees Samuel, she somehow knows it is Saul who stands before her. Nor does it do any good to say the woman was faking the event. This would not explain Saul’s own conversation with Samuel. If the woman was lying, how is it that Saul speaks to the spirit of Samuel? There is evidently some entity present, because Saul bows down before it in homage.

The truth is that everything in this narrative conforms to ancient Near Eastern parallels that refer to the spirits of human dead as divine beings (*elohim*), and that have such spirits being able to cross over into the realm of the embodied living. In the literature of the broader ancient Near East, there were a variety of terms for entities we would think of as ghosts or spirits of the dead, some of which are found in the Old Testament. The word *elohim* is one of those words. Another is the word *ob* (pronounced with long “o”).

The word *ob* often speaks of a spirit, and a spirit of a departed human being. As today, there was a conception in ancient Israel that even after people were put into the grave, their spirit could come back and interact (for good or evil) with the living. In Isaiah 29:4, for example, Isaiah says, “and you shall be brought low; from the earth you shall speak . . . your voice shall come from the ground like the voice of a ghost (*ob*)” (ESV). People who could commune with the dead (with an *ob*) were condemned to death in the Old Testament law (Lev. 20:27).

1 Samuel 28:7, most English translations have Saul asking something like “Find me a woman who is *a medium*.” That translation is in the ballpark, but it misses something. The Hebrew behind it more literally reads, “Find me a woman, a mistress of the *ob*.” Specifically, 8, Saul asks (again more literally from the Hebrew), “Consult for me an *ob*, and bring up for me whomever I shall name to you.” Saul specifically wanted a direct line to the spirit of Samuel—and he got his wish. And the *ob* produced was also called an *elohim*.

Before we leave this example, it is worth pointing out that the death penalty for consulting a spirit of a human dead person was not issued because such consultations didn't work. Rather, there was a concern because they *did*. To commune with the spirits of the human dead was a violation of one's proper plane of existence. It was trespassing into the forbidden realm of the "spirit world," a world whose inhabitants were put there by God. We tend to assume that when a human spirit goes to heaven or hell they have no mobility, as it were. Out conception of the afterlife in that regard doesn't line up with the text.

I mentioned earlier that one of the reasons we can't quite wrap our mind around the "flexibility" of the word *elohim* is because we're used to thinking of that term as denoting a being who possesses unique, unshared attributes—the *Elohim* of Israel, as it were. That just isn't true. While it's true that the word came to be used as a name for the God of Israel, the term itself has no essence that must be equated with Yahweh. The Old Testament passages above that have demons and spirits of the dead as *elohim* forbid such an equation. This equation must be dispensed with. The word *elohim* more broadly does not refer to "deity attributes." Rather, it points to a plane of existence. An *elohim* is simply a being whose proper habitation is the spirit world.

That definition needs some unpacking. By "spirit world," I mean "that place inhabited by beings who don't by nature have physical bodies, or who have been separated from physical bodies." That doesn't mean these beings cannot assume physical form. We've already seen that angels and even Yahweh can do that (Gen 18) if they wish. The point is that angels and Yahweh are not by nature physical beings—they are spirits (Psa. 104:4; Heb. 1:14; John 4:24). The same would go for the plural *elohim* in the heavenly council, whether they are faithful to Yahweh or have rebelled against Yahweh (demons).

This approach works with the human dead very well. By nature human beings are physical beings into which God has placed an eternal spirit. When we die, our bodies suffer physical decay and corruption, and our spirits go to the "spirit world" or "afterlife," which has its own sort of cosmic geography, described by terms like "heaven" and "hell." A prerequisite for residing in this realm is being disembodied, since that plane of reality is designated as home for disembodied beings. At times, disembodied spirits (like Samuel) are permitted to "pass over" to their old estate. At other times, a human who has not died is allowed to glimpse the "other side"—for example, Paul (2 Cor. 12:1-4) or Isaiah (Isa. 6).

But why refer to spiritual beings as *elohim*? The association is not difficult to understand, actually. Since God is a spirit, and in fact the supreme spirit, and he is "father of all spirits" (Heb. 12:9), then the realm of the spirits is "where God lives." The beings who belong to the spirit realm are therefore "divine." The best word to capture that conception is *elohim*. An *elohim* is a divine being, in that an *elohim* is an inhabitant of the spiritual plane of reality.

Angels may also be identified as *elohim* depending on whether there is a connection between Genesis 35:7 and Genesis 32:1-2. In Gen. 35:7, the word "God" (in all English translations) is elohim, but it is accompanied by a *plural* verb form, which may mean we are to translate the word "gods." If Gen 35:7 then has Jacob saying "the gods"

appeared to him when he was feeling from his brother, he has to be referring to Gen. 32:1-2, when “the angels of God” appeared to him at that time. We’ll be tackling this issue in a later chapter, but for now it is safe to say that Angels are *elohim* anyway by virtue of them being spirits (Heb. 1:14).

What all this means is that, although there are multiple beings in the spiritual plane of reality who are called *elohim*, we are not required to assume that they are the same when it comes to attributes. They are just “on the same playing field” without respect to difference in kind.

In the future, the spiritual realm and the earthly realm are apparently merged (the eternal state / new heaven and new earth), allowing a “heavenly” plane of reality to have physicality (and vice versa). This seems to be foreshadowed in instances in the New Testament where Jesus is taken to heaven bodily (he already possessed what Paul calls the glorified body or the resurrection body; 1 Cor 15:39ff.) and the transfiguration, where Peter, James, and John somehow recognized Moses and Elijah (Mark 9:1-4). It was actually foreshadowed even earlier—but for that we need to go back to Genesis 1.

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[i] The word for “God” here is singular: *eloah*. Some translations inaccurately read “They sacrificed to demons, no gods,” or “They sacrificed to demons that were no gods.” Both of these examples make it sound like the demons are not gods, but the text says the opposite. The goal may also be to try and make it seem as though gods are only idols. This translation allows this argument when juxtaposed with Deut 32:21. Hence it is a misguided attempt at “preserving monotheism” by the translator.